



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council sees results from collaboration with New Mexico officials to address issues with the Real ID Act

CROWNPOINT, N.M. – On Friday, Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) and Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) were present as the Navajo Nation Council hosted a town hall meeting to provide information and to hear issues from the public regarding New Mexico's implementation of the federal Real ID Act.

In 2005, Congress passed the Real ID Act that established minimum-security standards for issuing driver's licenses and identification cards. The federal Act, which is enforced by the Department of Homeland Security, requires states to become compliant by October 2020.

Nearly 60 people were in attendance at the Navajo Technical University Wellness Center in Crownpoint as the Council members, New Mexico MVD deputy director Jerry P. Valdez, Navajo Nation Office of Vital Records, and Navajo Tribal Utility Authority presented and answered questions from the public.

Speaker Bates explained that the town hall resulted from his Council colleagues requesting help on behalf of their constituents, many of who are elderly Navajo people, who were having many problems obtaining driver's licenses due to the new standards based on the federal Real ID Act. The Council then began meeting with the New Mexico Taxation and Revenue Department, MVD, and Office of Vital Records to resolve the issues.

As a result of the previous meetings between the Council and New Mexico officials, MVD deputy director Jerry P. Valdez announced on Friday that the MVD will now accept a Certificate of Indian Blood and affidavit of birth from individuals seeking to obtain a driver's license, identification card, or a driving authorization card. He also informed the Council members that at least 50 Navajo people were able to obtain a driver's license over a two-day timeframe in which the MVD stationed a mobile unit in Crownpoint to help local residents.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake), who recommended the town hall meeting, provided translation for Navajo elders and played a key part in answering questions and facilitating the dialogue between the public and officials on Friday.

Delegate Tsosie said it is important to help Navajo elderly people to obtain driver's licenses because many have to drive long distances for many services such as medical appointments, to purchase groceries, cash checks, and others.

Council Delegate Steven Begay (Coyote Canyon, Mexican Springs, Naschitti, Tohatchi, Bahastl'a'a'), who has also been a strong advocate for his constituents, spent time this past week helping people as they went to the MVD's mobile unit in Crownpoint to obtain driver's licenses. He added that it has been a difficult process and acknowledged that this issue has brought great awareness to state officials and made them aware that laws that are passed affect people differently.

"When legislatures make unfair presumptions that all societies are the same, huge misrepresentation occurs," said Delegate Begay. "We as the Navajo Nation had to put our best foot forward to explain that a great number of our Navajo elders were born at home and did not have the luxury of being documented at birth. Speaker Bates led the charge to assist in making our own Navajo Nation tribal enrollment documentation acceptable by the state of New Mexico."

He added that language and technology barriers continue to hinder Navajo elders when dealing with state issues and processes, but he also said that the Real ID Act issues are bringing these issues to the forefront for many state officials and legislators.

An official with NTUA was also at the town hall to present information on utility bills that help to prove residency for individuals who have to show such documentation to the MVD. MVD deputy director Valdez said the MVD offices will accept utility bills from NTUA as proof of residency.

Speaker Bates said the Council's efforts in coordination with state officials have produced results, however, there are other issues such as name changes, changes in marriage status, and others that create additional problems. Many of these issues were also brought up at the town hall meeting and will require additional discussions and adjustments to resolve, added Speaker Bates.

Friday's town hall meeting was the first of several that the Council intends to host in the state of New Mexico to continue helping Navajo constituents. The New Mexico MVD also said they will continue to station their mobile unit in Navajo communities to provide assistance.

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